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ABSTRACT

In "A Nation at Risk," the National Commission on Excellence in Education published a recommended high school curriculum based on higher standards for student achievement. This document examines the graduation requirements of private schools, using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). Findings indicate that for the 1990-91 school year, the private school record in meeting the commission's recommendations for graduation was mixed. In several subjects, notably computer science and social science, many private schools met or exceeded the recommendation. However, in other subjects, such as science and mathematics, they required fewer than the recommended years. Even though private schools failed to meet the recommendations for some subjects, private schools required more hours of study in five subjects, including mathematics and science, than public schools. Private schools required no fewer years of study in English than did public schools. A greater percentage of private schools also met all requirements than did public schools. Most of the differences between types of private schools were in the foreign language requirement. The variation in the years of foreign language required may reflect the orientations of different types of private schools toward preparing students for college. One table is included. (LMI)

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

ISSUE BRIEF

Private School Graduation Requirements

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In *A Nation at Risk* the National Commission on Excellence in Education published a suggested high school curriculum to clarify the essentials of a strong curriculum. With the push for higher standards continuing today, it is worthwhile to examine the graduation requirements of private schools. The National Commission on Excellence in Education recommended that all students seeking a high school diploma should take, at a minimum, during their four years of high school: 4 years of English; 3 years of mathematics; one-half year of computer science; 3 years of science; 3 years of social science; and, for the college bound, two years of foreign language. Do private schools meet these recommended graduation requirements? How do the graduation requirements of private schools compare to those of public schools? Do graduation requirements vary by the type of private school? These questions and others relating to private schools can be addressed by data from NCES 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS).

Do private schools meet the graduation requirements recommended by the Commission on Excellence in Education?

In school year 1990-91, private schools, on average, fulfilled the recommended requirements (table 1) in computer science (0.5 years) and social science (3.1 years), however, they fell short in English (3.8 years), mathematics (2.8 years), physical/biological science (2.5 years), and foreign language (1.1 years). All three types of schools, Catholic, other religious, and non-sectarian, met the recommended requirements in computer science and social science, while failing to meet the recommended years of study in physical/biological science and foreign language. For mathematics, only non-sectarian schools required the recommended number of years. When the three types of private schools are sub-divided into nine categories (see table 1), computer science and social science were the only subjects in which all categories of private schools met, on average, the recommended years of study. At the other extreme, physical/biological science was the only subject area in which schools of all nine categories failed to meet the recommendation.

How do the graduation requirements of private schools compare to those of public schools?

Another comparison benchmark is provided by the graduation requirements of public schools. Private schools required more years of study in all subjects, with the exception of English, than public schools in order to graduate high school. Both private and public schools required, on average, the same number of years of English for graduation. This pattern of public/private difference is exhibited when only schools with a college preparatory program are considered. For schools without a college preparatory program, private schools required more years of study in only one subject, mathematics. A greater percentage of private schools, in particular those with college preparatory programs, met all recommended requirements than public schools.

Do graduation requirements vary by private school type?

The three types of private schools differed only in the number of years of foreign language they required; with Catholic and non-sectarian schools requiring more years of study than other religious schools. At the nine-category level almost all of the differences between school types were in the number of years of foreign languages required; which ranged from 0.2 years for special education schools to two years for private order catholic schools and regular non-sectarian schools. The orientation of schools toward preparing students for college was a factor in school type difference. Among public schools there was no difference between schools who did or did not offer college preparatory programs. Private schools which had college preparatory programs required more years of foreign language, as well as mathematics, than those without college preparatory programs.

Conclusion

For the 1990-91 school year, the private school record in meeting the National Commission on Excellence recommendations for graduation was mixed. In several

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EA 026 655

Table 1.--Graduation requirements in public and private secondary schools and percent of schools meeting all Nation at Risk recommendations: 1990-91

	English	Math	Computer Science	Social Science	Physical/ Biological Science	Foreign Language	Percent meeting recommendation
Nation at Risk	4.0	3.0	0.5	3.0	3.0	2.0	100.0%
Public Schools	3.8	2.4	0.3	2.9	2.1	0.3	1.4
with college preparatory	3.8	2.4	0.3	2.9	2.1	0.3	1.5
without college preparatory	3.8	2.5	0.3	2.9	2.2	0.3	1.0
Private Schools	3.8	2.8	0.5	3.1	2.5	1.1	15.2
with college preparatory	3.8	2.8	0.6	3.1	2.5	1.2	17.0
without college preparatory	3.7	2.7	0.3	3.0	2.4	0.6	1.4*
Catholic	4.0	2.8	0.5	3.1	2.4	1.5	21.5
Parochial	3.9	2.6	0.6	3.0	2.3	0.8	10.1*
Diocesan	4.0	2.7	0.4	3.2	2.4	1.3	21.6
Private Order	4.0	3.0	0.5	3.0	2.5	2.0	26.8
Other religious	3.8	2.8	0.5	3.2	2.5	0.9	12.6
Conservative Christian	3.7	2.7	0.5	3.2	2.4	0.6	8.7
Affiliated	3.9	2.9	0.5	3.3	2.7	1.4	16.3
Unaffiliated	3.9	2.9	0.6	3.2	2.6	1.1	19.5
Non-sectarian	3.8	2.9	0.6	3.0	2.5	1.3	16.8
Regular	3.9	3.1	0.6	3.1	2.6	2.0	27.6
Special emphasis	3.6	2.9	0.6	2.9	2.2	1.4	11.3
Special Education	3.7	2.6	0.6	3.0	2.4	0.2	3.0*

*Coefficient of variation is greater than 50%.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1990-91.

subjects, notably computer science and social science, many private schools met or exceeded the recommendation, while in other subjects, such as science and mathematics, they required fewer than the recommended years. The failure of many public and private schools to meet the recommended years of study in science and mathematics is of particular concern since the National Education Goals specifically call for the United States to be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement. Even though private schools failed to meet the recommendations for some subjects, private schools required more hours of study in five subjects, including mathematics and science, than public schools. In the sixth subject, English, private schools required no fewer years of study than public schools. A greater percentage of private schools also met all requirements then public schools. Most of the differences between types of private schools were in the foreign language requirement. Since it appears that private schools, like the National Commission on Excellence in Education, view foreign language as primarily for the college-bound, the variation in the years of foreign language required may be reflecting variation in the orientation of different types of private schools toward preparing students for college.

For more information, see the following reports:

National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform*. Washington D.C.: 1983.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey: Sample Design and Estimation*, (NCES 93-449) by S. Kaufman. Washington D.C.: 1993.

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This Issue Brief was prepared by Stephen Broughman, NCES and Carol L. Rohr, Pinkerton Computer Consultants, Inc. To obtain standard errors or definitions of terms for this Issue Brief, or to obtain additional information about the Schools and Staffing Survey, contact Stephen Broughman (202) 219-1744. To order additional copies of this Issue Brief or other NCES publications, call 1-800-424-1616.

NCES 95-145